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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that physically attractive people in this culture are treated more favorably than are unattractive people. If this is so, acts of sexual harassment perpetrated by attractive males might be viewed less harshly than the same acts perpetrated by unattractive males. A study was conducted to examine the relationshp between evaluations of sexual harassment and various levels of initiator attractiveness, and the role of pro-feminist attitudes on such evaluations. College students (N=151), divided into three groups, rated the degree of offensiveness of 22 acts of sexual harassment. Group I received a photocopy of an "attractive" male perpetrator, group II received a photocopy of an "unattractive" male perpetrator, and group III received no photocopy. All subjects completed a questionnaire on womanhood to determine pro-feminist and sexist views. Ratings were found to differ from male to female subjects, with females being less tolerant of sexual harassment. Pro-feminist attitudes were found to exert a greater influence than perpetrator attractiveness on offensiveness ratings. Pro-feminist males were consistently less tolerant of sexual harassment than were sexist males. The pattern for females was more complicated. (NB)

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Relationship Between Sexual Harassment, Initiator Attractiveness and Pro-feminist Attitudes

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Running Head: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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Abstract

Degree of offensiveness ratings were obtained for various acts of sexual harassment. The variables examined were the perpetrator's level of attractiveness and subjects' views toward feminism. Ratings were found to differ from male and female subjects, with females being less tolerant of sexual harassment. Pro-feminist attitudes were found to extert a greater influence than perpretrator attractiveness on offensiveness ratings. "Pro-feminist" males were consistently less tolerant of sexual harassment than "sexist" males. The pattern for females was more complicated.

Relationship Between Sexual Harassment,

Initiator Attractiveness and Pro-feminist Attitudes

Research in social psychology has shown that physically attractive people in our culture are treated more favorably than unattractive people. Other things being equal, they are liked more (Walsten, 1966); are seen as having more social skills (Goldman & Lewis, 1977); are seen as being more talented (Landy & Sigall, 1974); perceived as having a better personality, as occupying a higher status, and as more likely to be happy (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Studies have also shown that attractive people are treated more leniently when they commit anti-social acts (Dion, 1972) and tend to receive less severe sentences by juries when found guilty of a crime (Landy & Aranson, 1969).

In a different area of social-psychological research, considerable data are available to suggest that the majority of women in the workplace have experienced some form of sexual harassment (The Association for Women in Science Newsletter, Jan/Feb, 1978), (Redbook, 1976). However, much of the research on this phenomena has been restricted to survey or correlational methodology. Studies have generally focused on such issues as what behavior constitutes sexual harassment, the frequency of occurrence of such behavior and gender differences in the perception of sexual harassment (Brewer, 1982). Very little is known about the role of attitudes and/or the physical characteristics of the perpetrator in the perception and evaluation of sexual harassment.

If indeed attractive people are treated more leniently when they commit anti-social acts , it seems reasonable to assume that acts of sexual harassment perpertrated by attractive males might be viewed less harshly than the same acts perpretrated by an unattractive male.

The present study represents an exploratory attempt to determine the relationship between evaluations of sexual harassment and various levels of initiator attractiveness, and to examine the role of pro-feminine attitudes on such evaluations.

Method

Subjects

One hundred and fifty-one college students participated in the study. The subjects were primarily Juniors and Seniors in college with predominately white, middle-class backgrounds.

Materials and Procedures

The subjects were randomly assigned to one of three groups on the basis of previously assigned research numbers. Each group received a packet consisting of a cover page, a 15-item questionnaire on womanhood, and a one-page scenario in which a male worker was accused of sexually harassing a female co-worker. Twenty-two separate acts which might be perceived as sexual harassment were described. Subjects were asked to rate each act on a 5-point "offensiveness" scale and to indicate an appropriate punishment for the hypothetical perpetrator, which varied from a "mild repremand" to "dismissal from the job and a five-year jail

sentence.

Attached to the packets given to Group I was a photocopy of an "attractive" male perpetrator and to Group II a photocopy of an "unattractive" male perpetrator. Group III subjects received packets with no photocopy attached. (Attractiveness ratings were obtained in a prior study by having heterogeneous groups of 70 university students rank 20 male photographs. Only head shots were used to control for body type preferences. The researchers used the three "most attractive" and the three "least attractive" photos in the current investigation).

The opinionnaire on womanhood was scored according to standardized procedures. Subjects with scores above the median were labeled "pro-feminist," while those below the median were described as "sexists."

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Gender differences in the evaluation of sexually harassing acts.

Sexually harassing act	Group	Mean	s.d.	t
1. Comment: "Nice Ass"	M	1.63	0.783	-0.56
	F	1.70	0.680	
2. Comment: "Hard Night Baby?"	M	1.86	0.748	
	F	1.70	0.566	1.33
3. Telling dirty jokes	M	2.19	0.804	
	F	2.42	0.801	-1.64
4. Comment: "I'm sure glad short dresses are coming back in style!"	M	3.11	0.843	
	F	2.86	0.811	1.73
5. Staring at breast	M	2.03	0.761	
	F	1.54	0.537	4.20*

6.	Staring at legs	M	2.57	0.901	
		F	2.32	0.760	1.73
7.	Winking and smiling	M	3.07	0.937	
		F	2.86	0.693	1.46
8.	Touching hair	M	2.37	0.837	
		F	2.14	0.639	1.76
9.	Placing arm around waist	M	1.94	0.720	
		F	1.88	0.657	0.54
10.	Pinching buttocks	M	1.16	0.367	
		F	1.07	0.258	1.57
11.	Comment: "How about a quickie?"	M	1.21	0.447	
		F	1.10	0.310	1.62
12.	Comment: "We could make beautiful music together."	M	1.96	0.789	
		F	1.63	0.698	2.68*
13.	Comment: "My place or yours?"	M	1.76	0.788	
		F	1.50	0.601	2.01
14.	Comment: (Double meanings) "You look tired today, was it a long night?"	M	2.06	0.883	
		F	1.88	0.927	1.11
15.	Asking to meet for a drink	M	2.80	0.878	
		F	2.58	0.706	1.57
16.	Suggesting dinner at his place.	M	2.77	0.854	1.90
		F	2.49	0.805	
17.	Attempting to give a backrub during break.	M	1.97	0.780	
		F	1.82	0.658	1.15
18.	Constantly brushing against a woman, even in open areas.	M	1.54	0.582	
		F	1.46	0.503	0.90
19.	Ignoring objections to his his forwardness	M	1.86	0.708	
		F	1.58	0.680	2.25*
20.	Implied job could be easier with sexual favors	M	1.39	0.519	
		F	1.16	0.414	2.75*
21.	Told job could be made unpleasant and unsuccessful without sexual favors.	M	1.21	0.413	
		F	1.10	0.363	1.58

22.	Physical assault and attempted rape.	M	1.01	0.120	
		F	1.00	0.000	1.00

*Significant at the .01 level

Table 1 reflects the means, SD's and t scores for overall ratings of various acts of sexual harassment. The results indicate that females rate such acts as; staring at (a woman's) breast (item 5), the comment "we could make beautiful music together," (item 12) (a man) ignoring objections to his forwardness (item 19), and the act of "implying that the job could be easier with sexual favors," significantly more offensive than did males (item 20).

Table 2

Overall Ratings of Acceptability of Sexual Harassment

	Attractive	Control	Unattractive
Males			
Pro-feminist	41.31	39.00	44.00
Sexist	48.67	43.13	45.11
Females			
Pro-feminist	36.33	39.00	40.00
Sexist	39.00	40.70	42.56

The general pattern of more tolerance by males for the acts described in our assessment was paralleled by more "sexist" average scores by males (45.57) than females (39.53) on the questionnaire on womanhood. Because of the different means on the womanhood questionnaire for males and females, separate analyses were conducted for males and females. The sums of scores on all 22 harassing acts for males and females, by "sexist" versus

"pro-feminist" attitudes, by attractiveness condition are presented in Table 2 (minimum 22, maximum 110, with lower scores indicating the acts were perceived as more harassing). Neither the attractiveness nor the attitude toward women factor was significant for females. For males those with more "sexist" attitudes rated the described acts as less offensive ($F(1,64) = 5.038$, $p < .03$). Analyses of the ratings of the specific acts suggests that a differentiated pattern of responding produced the overall non-significant results for women.

To determine the pattern of judgments which produced the overall ratings separate 3 by 2 analyses of variance were conducted with attitudes toward women and attractiveness as the two factors and suggested punishment and rating of each act as dependent variables. For males suggested punishment was unrelated to the two factors. For females, the "pro-feminist" group suggest harsher punishment ($F(1,51) = 4.06$, $f < .05$). However, as the analyses below illustrate, their pattern did not obtain for the judgment of the individual acts.

For example, differences were found in the ratings of the comment "hard night baby?" ($F(1, 51) = 5.21$, $p < .03$) and "hair touching" by the perpetrator ($F(1, 51) = 6.165$, $p < .02$). "Pro-feminist" females rated both acts as less offensive than did "sexist" females. One post hoc speculation as to why these differences were found is that perhaps "pro-feminist" women are also more liberal in their general orientation, and thus more tolerant of

inappropriate male behavior.

If should also be noted that, among female subjects, perpetrator attractiveness appeared to influence the ratings of some acts but not others. The comment, "nice ass," for example, was found to be significantly less offensive when attributed to an attractive perpetrator than by an unattractive one ($F(2, 51) = 3.419$, $p < .04$).

Significant differences among women subjects in the evaluation of the perpretrator's invitation to "dinner at my house," reflects an interaction effect between perpetrator attractiveness and "sexist" views. Females labeled "sexist" rated attractive males who offered such an invitation as more offensive than unattractive perpetrators.

Males, classified as "sexist" rated the following items less offensive than males with a pro-feminist view: the comment "I'm sure glad short dresses are coming back in style!" ($F(1, 64) = 5.542$, $p < .02$); "hair touching" ($F(1, 64) = 7.784$, $p < .007$) and repeatedly asking "how about meeting for a drink after work" ($F(1, 64) = 3.984$, $p < .05$).

These findings tend to support the literature on sexual harassment which indicates that sex differences exist in the perception of what constitutes sexual harassment and that males are generally more lenient than females in their evaluation of sexually harassing acts (Gutek, et al., 1980). Perhaps the most important finding in the current study is that "feminist" attitudes serve to

alternate the effects of attractiveness in the evaluation of acts perceived as sexual harassment. This finding parallels the results of a survey study (Jensen & Gutek, 1981) which suggest that "sex-role beliefs will dictate how a woman who has been sexually harassed is going to feel about the incident."

Further research is needed, however, to determine the generalizability of the present findings based on a student population to a population in the world of work.

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